

# Ehrlich slams door on 'compassionate conservatism'

Gov. Robert Ehrlich had the opportunity recently to make an important policy decision and an equally important political decision. And he blew his chance on both counts.

On the policy front, President George Bush vowed to "leave no child behind," and made education a top legislative priority. In Maryland, the governor vetoed legislation that would have allowed undocumented immigrants to have access to in-state tuition rates — as long as they graduate from a Maryland high school and attend their last three years at a Maryland high school, and agree to apply for permanent residency within 30 days of becoming eligible.

This bill would have opened up the doors of opportunity to people like Jose Morales (not his real name), an honors student at Albert Einstein High School who came to the United States when he was 3 years old, because his family was forced to flee the civil war in Guatemala. Montgomery County is the only home he remembers. Jose is taking advance placement courses in Spanish, biology and literature.

His mother has been working as a paralegal and has been paying taxes for more than 10 years. She is an asset to the community.

Her application to adjust her immigration status has been pending at the Immigration and Naturalization Service for years, but the

wheels of justice for immigrants turn very slowly. Now, Jose will not go to college, because he will be unable to afford the out-of-state tuition rates.

Republican and Democratic governors across the country have recognized that "leave no child behind" applies to every child. Texas, California, New York, Oklahoma and Utah have passed identical laws in recent years. They have recognized that such laws are cost-effective; they reward hard work, and they are fundamentally fair.

Gov. Ehrlich could have followed the lead of the likes of Govs. Rick Perry of Texas and George Pataki of New York, and invested in Maryland's most precious resource — our children. He chose not to.

Politically, Gov. Ehrlich has made a significant mistake. While the immigrant tuition bill affects all immigrant communities, it disproportionately impacts the Latino community, which is the largest growing community in Maryland and nationwide.

Gov. Ehrlich had to choose whether to follow the President Bush model of Latino outreach, or the Pete Wilson model.

While I have many profound disagreements with President Bush on a host of immigration issues, he has also taken progressive stands on a range of critically important

issues, such as his strong statement of opposition in 1996 to a Republican proposal to overturn Supreme Court precedent and give states the authority to kick undocumented kids out of public schools. Then-Gov. Bush correctly recognized that this was unsound, unfair, and unconstitutional. As a result of these and other actions, the Latino vote is genuinely in play on a national level.

On the other hand, Pete Wilson, the Republican governor of California from 1991-99, was the best thing that ever happened to the Democratic Party in that state. As governor, he decided that he could further his presidential aspirations by kowtowing to the far right and blaming the state's economic woes on immigrants. As a result, Latinos in California are as strongly Democratic as African Americans. The state that brought us Ronald Reagan has become a solid Democratic state.

Gov. Ehrlich made his choice. Latinos in Maryland, such as Jose — and all Marylanders who believe in a "fair shake" — will take note and remember at the polls.

**Thomas Perez,**  
Takoma Park

*The writer is a Democrat and represents District 5 on the Montgomery County Council.*